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THE THREE LEVELS OF THE MIND AND THE SIX SENSE ORGANS  
(Lecture given Sunday, January 20, 1985)  
by Master Sheng-Yen)

In the Surangama Sutra the Buddha continues to question Ananda as to why he chose to follow him. As we have learned in earlier lectures, it was the Buddha's thirty-two excellent characteristics that first attracted Ananda. The Buddha then leads Ananda to discover that it was the working of his eyes and his mind which aroused admiration in him and caused him to follow the Buddha. The Buddha asks Ananda where his mind and his eyes are. (The eyes signify all six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness). The Buddha tells Ananda that all vexations arise from the coming together of body and mind, and like a king who must know where to find and destroy bandits that invade his country, we must know where to find this interaction between the mind and the sense organs before we can cease the defilement of the mind.

The functioning of the mind and eyes can be discussed on three levels. On the first level, the functioning is based completely on feelings. On the second level, it is based on reason. And on the third level, it is the functioning of an enlightened person. These three levels are comparable to the three levels of beauty discussed last week. But in the last lecture, the emphasis was on the object -- seeing beauty in another person or thing, whereas here we are discussing subject -- mind and eyes as they function within the individual.



If we look on the first level, that of feelings, we can see just how subjective an emotion such as love really is. Recently, a woman came to talk to me. She said that she felt as though she had lived her life in vain. She had been married for over ten years, had children, but she had never really experienced romantic love. She felt empty, and she said she wanted to find a true lover. I said, "Ok, but what about your husband?" She said, "Well, he fed me and we brought up children together, but it was not true love." So I replied, "In my opinion, eating something is real; bringing up children is real; having sex is real; but love is false." The woman was surprised. She said, "According to the Dharma, everything is false. If you say everything is false, that makes sense to me, but now you are saying that something is real and something is false!" I responded, "I can say that eating or having sex is real. But love is really not love of someone else; it is really love of yourself. You are taking another person to be the object of your love, but there is no objective reason why you should love this other person."

Someone just told me of a recent happening in Taiwan. A high-school teacher fell in love with a woman. He went after her without giving up. But the woman did not care about him. The teacher was so desperate that he killed her, cut her body up into chunks, cooked them, and put them into the refrigerator. Now, usually we say that love is in the heart. Since he felt he loved her heart most, he even consumed part of her heart. Eventually he was arrested. When the police asked him why he killed the woman, he replied, "Because I was in love with her."

When we think that we love someone, we really focus our imagination on to the other person and then proceed to love our imagination. But it is not the other person, him or herself, that we love. As you say in America, "Love is in the eyes of the beholder."

The woman who wanted to take a lover made the comment: "What you say reminds me of something I read in a book on psychology." It said that when we think that we love someone, our love has less to do with the other person and more with our own needs and dreams. We idealize the other person so that they fit these needs and dreams. So when we court others, we are really courting ourselves. In this sense, it is possible to fall in love with almost anyone as long as you can connect them with your own ideas and dreams. It doesn't matter even if they bear only the remotest resemblance to these dreams. I said, "Well, I was speaking only from the viewpoint of Buddhadharma. It just so happens that in this respect someone else agrees."

I just used love as an example. But the explanation is the same for just about every interaction and every impression we develop about things and people. Persons and objects do exist. But our perceptions of them are subjective. This subjective



perception can be either personal or common. The former type is the perception of each different individual. The latter is the perception of a given group or society in general. But a perception may not be true and objective even if the whole of society says that it is. Indeed, it is no more real than a personal perception. Common perceptions exist because of common dreams and needs, and as a result, common idealizations and labels are associated with certain people, things, places, or events.

We know that customs and habits differ from country to country. Laws change with time. Fashions become outmoded. These indicate that common, subjective judgments also differ from time to time and place to place; they are not absolute. Otherwise, we should find the same laws and customs holding true everywhere.

Then the woman who had visited me said, "According to what you have said, everything is subjective and false, so why bother living?" I replied, "You're over-reacting. You simply have to understand that men and women build up false, confused, and unfounded perceptions of each other. People get married as a result of this process. If women remained too clear-headed, they would see problems in all men and never get married. And if men did not give the impression of being so nice, they would remain single." In reality, then, the whole process involves falsity, but people see it as real. And after getting married, the husband will get interested in other women, and the wife, like the woman who came to see me, starts to think of other men and divorce. I told this woman to think about her situation seriously; her marriage is inherently false, but if she gets divorced, she will only manage to find another false one. So I advised her to stay with her false marriage, to live with it in spite of its falsity.

Up to now we have been discussing emotion. The recognition that emotion is false arises as a result of the reasoning faculty: the ability to think logically, and this ability is characteristic of the second level of the mind. Although we can recognize through reason the falsity of feelings of love, it is quite another thing to become free from the bondage of these emotions. And if before we are free from this bondage, we continue to generate these emotions, we will continue to create problems for ourselves. For example, a couple may be deeply in love before they get married. Each one will think that the other is the ideal companion. But somehow, once they are married, they begin to see faults in each other and regret the blindness that led them to marry. Husband and wife will both think: "If I get the opportunity, I will find someone who is really compatible with me, and I will get out of this awful marriage." If they do get an opportunity to create another illusion, then two things only will be certain. The first marriage will fail, and the second marriage will prove no less illusory than the first.



Of course, in America it is very common for people to get married many times. With this kind of marital instability, there will be no stability in emotional and family life. You may have happiness for a short while, but it will not last long. This applies also to people who are just dating and have not yet married. Here, also, the function of dreams and false perceptions is just as relevant.

When I returned to Taiwan last summer, I met a Buddhist practitioner who had the greatest respect for me. His attitude was quite similar to that of a girl blindly in love with her Prince Charming. He thought that I was the very best person in the world. Since he owned a car, he told me, "Here is my car. I'll pay for the gas, and I'll donate my time; wherever you go, let me drive you around. I'll stay with you from now on." But after about three months, he started to complain: "Shih-fu, you are not really the person I thought you were. How come you've changed?" I said, "It is not I who have changed. It is rather that you are searching for a shadow in your mind, and I am not that shadow. So perhaps you should leave." He left. He woke up from his dream.

If you deal with things in a subjective manner, you cannot help but encounter vexations. In Chinese Temples there are bamboo fortune-telling sticks. You put these sticks into a container, shake them around until one of the sticks falls out. You then read the fortune written on the stick and interpret as you wish. Often people come to this Center, hoping to use these sticks to answer their questions. To such people I usually say, "Although this is a Buddhist Temple, we do not provide fortune-telling sticks. But I can give you some general advice: whatever problems concern you, there is no need to consult deities or Bodhisattvas. You should ask yourself, because no one knows as much about yourself as you do. But when you do this, you should try to look at yourself as if you are another person, so that the problem can be resolved without concern for your own potential profit or loss. With this attitude, you'll have a much better chance of making a good decision than by using the sticks."

Once during a busy period in Taiwan, a woman came to me with an ethical problem concerning her daughter's marriage. She said, "My daughter is going to get married, but the groom's family wants to know the date and time of her birth. I've been to several astrologers, and they've all told me that the time of my daughter's birth is inauspicious. Now I'm thinking of giving them false information." I replied, "OK, then why have you come to me?" She said, "I'm just asking if it's all right to do this." I said, "No. It's not all right. According to Dharma, you should be truthful; lying is not the way. Why not approach them and say, 'If your son loves my daughter, then by all means let him marry her; if he does not love her, then he should get lost! The astrologers say my daughter is born at an inauspicious time. You can believe this or not as you like.'" If she gave



them the wrong information, she would create many problems for herself, and she would always worry that the other family would find out the truth. The woman took my advice and told the parents of her daughter's fiancée exactly what I recommended. They did get married. The fiancée said, "I love your daughter; who cares about the time of her birth?" This is the point: do not let your emotions, your likes and dislikes, cloud your judgment.

We should be able to conduct ourselves in an ethical and reasonable manner in our dealings with others. We need not fear potential problems. But what do we do if problems do occur? Let's go back to the example of the woman who wanted to get divorced. She said to me, "Shih-fu, according to what you say, no one should ever get divorced; everyone should just accept their fate." This is the proper attitude: if two people really cannot live together, then they should consider their children. If issues relating to the children can be satisfactorily resolved, it is all right to divorce. While Buddhadharmā does not recommend or approve of divorce, if two people cannot live together, then they have no choice but to separate. On the other hand, you should not get divorced just to find true love or to satisfy unresolved desires.

With the exception of a few practitioners, people need an emotional life to survive. But we should use our reason to regulate our emotion. Thus, we get consolation from our emotions, yet we do not let our emotions burn us like a consuming flame. In keeping moderation, we avoid many problems. I recently read a poem about rain. The poem suggested that rain conducts a symphony on the roof; throws a party on top of umbrellas; embroiders the streets with beautiful patterns. Rain gives life to all lives; it is life within life. The poem resulted from the poet's feelings. Ordinary people will think of rain as rain; it will be an inconvenience to them. The poet, however, uses his imagination to enliven the rain. In fact, the working of the poet's imagination is similar to the process of love: the lover imagines the beloved to be ideal. The difference is that the poet uses reason in the expression of his feelings. Thus, poetry is as much a part of one's emotions as love, but poetry is better inasmuch as it uses reason. If we can use reason to harness our emotions, there are many things that we can do: reading, music, painting, poetry. Of course, the best of all these is to participate in Ch'an retreats.

In practice, we use a combination of reason and emotion. We look for samadhi and enlightenment because we have been told that they exist. We imagine them to be very beautiful, exotic states. Our conception of samadhi and enlightenment is steadily enhanced by our imagination. The role of imagination, then, is quite similar in the desire for enlightenment and in romantic love. During the experience of shallow enlightenment or shallow samadhi, we would be convinced that these states do exist. But the deeper states of samadhi and enlightenment do not exist because the experiencer and experienced are one; since there is



no distinction, you cannot say what is experienced and what is not. Since you cannot say that anything is experienced, you cannot say anything exists. In this respect, samadhi or enlightenment and the object of love are quite dissimilar.

Now we come to the third level: the mind and eyes of one who is enlightened. This level is beyond the reach of reason and knowledge. Reason and knowledge can give only an insufficient account of this state of the mind. Recently, someone told me that one of the most famous modern scientists has said that investigation by research and analysis cannot lead to the whole truth; one can at best uncover the tip of the iceberg. Really one needs to use religion to understand the truth of the universe. But many scientists will not accept the existence of anything beyond the realm of the physical. Scientists in fact can be quite blind in this respect. They have very limited understanding and yet they believe that they can solve every problem by means of the scientific approach. On the other hand, there are scientists, especially those who are very accomplished, who gain insights into the limitation of the scientific method. Thus they may intuit that there is a reality behind the realm reachable by the scientific method. What is this reality? Philosophy is usually considered to be the foundation of science. And yet behind philosophy is religion. In other words, philosophy relies on reasoning; religion relies on experience, on realization. And of all the religions, the methods taught by Buddhadharma are the surest and the deepest.

What, then, are the mind and eyes of one who is enlightened? The mind and eyes of an enlightened person are different from those of an ordinary person. The mind of enlightenment is not the mind of emotion or reasoning. It is unlimited. It is the reality after liberation. It does not have any appearance or function, but all appearances and functions are not separate from this mind. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, it is said that this mind has no limit and it encompasses all the universes as countless as the sands of the Ganges river; and its nature is unmoving. It is important to understand that the mind of vexation, of feelings and thoughts, is never separate from the enlightened mind, but the enlightened mind is nevertheless free from these vexations.

The eye of one who is enlightened signifies the natural response that person will have to understand and help all sentient beings. Another word for it is Prajna, wisdom. One who is enlightened need not use his corporeal eyes to aid another. But he may use these sense organs, as well as any other faculty or function associated with his body that will help another sentient being. For example, it is said the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara has a thousand eyes and arms. A thousand simply means an unlimited, uncountable number. But these need not be ordinary, physical eyes and arms. Indeed, if any sentient being is helped by a Bodhisattva, then it can be said that an arm or an eye of the Bodhisattva was present in aid of that being. I



should explain that the Chinese word for 'assistant' is 'helping hand.' Thus we may say that President Reagan's aides are his helping hands. But these helping hands do not grow on Reagan's body; however, the authority to act comes from Reagan, so we can identify the helping hands with him.

Very often in my lectures I talk about levels. We should take the highest level as the goal, but our life will start on the first level. We should try to climb to higher levels. We should hope, for instance, at least to reach the second level. In the case of the lecture today, if we stay on the first level we will not be very different from animals. It is only when we reach the second level that we manifest the characteristics of a higher being. By remaining on the first level, we will be like animals, but we will feel greater vexation than animals since we are more intelligent.

\*\*\*\*\* NEWS ITEMS \*\*\*\*\*

November 3, Master Sheng-Yen returned to the the Center after his three-month stay in Taiwan.

November 9, Beginning Meditation Class.

November 15, Shih-fu will lecture at Manhattanville College.

November 19, Shih-fu will lecture at Columbia University.

November 22 - 23, Shih-fu will lecture at the Great River Taoist Center in Washington, D.C.

November 28, (7 p.m.) - December 5, (8 a.m.) - Seven-day Intensive Ch'an Retreat: an opportunity for students to practice Ch'an under the personal guidance of Master Sheng-Yen. For those with meditation experience only. Personal interview a prerequisite. Write or call for registration form. Members, \$60; Non-members, \$120.

December 25 (7 p.m.) - January 1 (8 a.m.). Seven-day Intensive Ch'an Retreat. Same information as above.

December 14, Beginning Meditation Class.

January 10, Shih-fu returns to Taiwan.

Nancy Patchen writes: I want to thank everyone at the Center for their friendship, hospitality (Southern Style!), and kindness during my four-month stay. The Center is a special place and you have a special teacher. I hope the center continues to grow and serve the U.S.

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